

# *Fetus In Fetu*

Thirty-five poems  
inspired by the lives  
of the Bunker family

by Carolyn Li-Madeo

Illustrated

# *Fetus In Fetu*



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## Foreword

In my senior year of high school I took a year-long course on infectious, human diseases: Ebola, influenza, leprosy, Chlamydia. I spent a long time studying photographs of magnified viruses, and harshly lit snapshots of rashes and lesions. Informed by what little science I could comprehend: death revealed a new face to me. It became something that I could acknowledge as thriving inside everything: a potential energy that all living things hold within themselves. Armed with this new outlook I tried to reexamine the deaths within my own history, specifically, the most personally mysterious: the passing of my pau-pau, my maternal grandmother, when I was seven-years-old.

Although I continue to carry many memories of my pau-pau with me, they mostly remain un-translated: my pau-pau and I navigated not only a distance of age during our short relationship, but we also communicated through a language barrier – from Taishanese to English. The memories that I associate with her death are intensely physical: touching the smooth inside of her upper arm during the summer before she was diagnosed with cancer, the peculiar smell of her hospice, the melting of my First Communion wafer on my tongue the month before she died. So many of these memories exist in a language-less plane, where it is hard for me to discern where my body begins and ends.

A deep rooted interest with bodies and cultural identity eventually lead me to the research that I pursued in college on spectacle ethnography. Spectacle ethnography which was most prominent in the eighteen and nineteen hundreds is a practice of putting people of color, or people with deformities on display for others' entertainment, usually under the thin guise of scientific presentation. It was through this research that I first 'met' Chang and Eng Bunker, who were famous throughout the world for being the original "Siamese Twins."

On May 11, 1811 Chang and Eng were born on a houseboat in the Kingdom of Siam, now Thailand. Their father was a Chinese fisherman whose name has been lost, and their mother, named Nok, was half-Chinese and half-Thai. Nok protected her sons from the wishes of the King of Siam, who had ordered the brothers to be killed, believing that their birth signaled the end of the world. Chang and Eng for the most part grew up like normal boys, playing and swimming, training their pet duck together and caring for their younger siblings. Sadly an outbreak of cholera when they were just adolescents changed their lives forever by claiming the lives of their father and their younger siblings. With their family's

main provider dead, the brothers became successful preserved duck egg merchants and business men at a young age. Their lives changed again when they were summoned to the King's palace as teens, where they made such a favorable impression on the King that they became Siam's first ambassadors to China.

In 1829 Chang and Eng were to travel again, this time to the United States with Captain Coffin of Boston, under contract with both the Captain and a merchant named Robert Hunter. Although the brothers often talked about returning to their homeland, they never did. Instead they were put on display for three years under the management of Captain Coffin and his wife. Eventually the brothers freed themselves from this harsh contract and set out displaying themselves throughout the United States and Europe under their own management. In 1839, the brothers settled in Wilkesboro County, North Carolina where they became successful tobacco farmers and outstanding members of their community. The brothers fell in love, courted and eventually married two sisters (not twins) named Adeline and Sarah Yates. Between the two marriages, 21 children were born. Eventually the two growing families separated. The brothers split their time by spending three nights intervals in each of their houses: this was an agreement that they kept until death.

Chang and Eng's lives are complicated narratives of perceived and created identity. The brothers were prolific slave owners; each of them sent one of their sons to fight in the Civil War. Chang and Eng lived in a United States where Chinese were not a common part of the human landscape, particularly in the North East and South, and so they created their own space for themselves and their mixed-heritage families: fashioning themselves as Southern gentlemen, who read poetry and were connoisseurs of fine French silks. Chang and Eng worked hard to educate all of their children, particularly their daughters, four of whom became school teachers.

One of the Bunker girls, Chang's daughter Nannie grabbed my attention while doing research on her father. Nannie was the only Bunker child whose diary has survived. In the portions of her letters and her diary that I was able to read, she writes about her journey to Western Europe with her father, uncle and her dearest cousin Katherine (who was dying from tuberculosis at the time). In her writing Nannie describes the people who she meets abroad, memories of her childhood in North Carolina, and a particularly stunning description of a dead work horse that she encountered during her time in Edinburgh.

Reading through Nannie's documents I found a place to enter into the Bunkers' narratives. Nannie who eventually also died from tuberculosis spent much of her time dissecting the death of her dear cousin Katherine, from whom she most likely contracted tuberculosis. I was eager to see how she navigated through her own mixed-heritage identity.

The following manuscript weaves together numerous narratives that I have used to explore my own identity, and the duality that I feel is paired with my mixed-heritage identity. Locations in the poems to follow vary from my gong-gong's (my maternal grandfather) house in Queens, to Europe and China. Voices portrayed include Chang Bunker, his children Christopher Wren and Nannie and my own. Death, inheritance, and the dual nature of personal identity and twinship haunt and connect these various narrative threads together.

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I was almost tender  
when I came to the blue bruises  
that freckle her body,

She knows that I am not to be trusted,  
even now planning my escape.

– Two excerpts from Cathy Song's  
“The Youngest Daughter”

## Meiklong

She never had your father –  
scrubbed, then lit free of cholera  
by unabashed hands of monks –

yet, it was into her that your siblings,  
so easily charmed by some bright notion –  
a bird or doll just out of reach –

caught hold of her current. A fisherman's knife  
the cloth that swaddled each of you as infants,  
candles set to sail hoping for the sea, a basket

of preserved duck eggs packed together  
with reeds and mud: all things lost to her  
and never searched for.



## Bathing with my brother

Some nights I bathe with my brother  
in the creek that cuts down behind our farm.  
Through September the water is warm –  
and we often forget ourselves out there  
in the tree sheltered bend that we have adopted.

I do not know all of the scars on my body:  
there are territories of my skin that I will  
never see, although I pass my hands over them  
during the darkness of our bath.

As children we helped to scrub and dress each other,  
even learned to walk and swim in tandem. After a storm  
I had often held my brother against me, matching  
his rib cage to mine. I took comfort in our dually rhythmic hearts.

Older now, each year I grow closer to him physically:  
my weaker body leaning towards his. I am a mile-a-night-vine,  
bending out towards his chest. I am certain that I will be the death of us,  
with the dreams that consume me as I lay in my damp skin,  
on our shared bed. What does the Siamese Twin dream of?  
Running alone, like you Carolyn. Oh, running. Running so very alone.

## Ing gáu

*Another mutt*

Near the Elk Club, off the highway  
that cuts through Queens, bordered  
by florists and stationary shops.

We had buried my grandmother earlier  
in deep afternoon, under blue and yellow  
shrouds and a constellation of incense.

At the final banquet I begged to be placed  
on my mother's lap, and from my perch  
I fussed, stuffing my hair into my mouth.

Gong-gong, worn by his summer weight  
suit, toasted quickly to his wife – *ah-mah*  
*pau-pau*, *Yee* – so the banquet could begin.

Removed, seated in my own chair, pleaded  
with to sit still, asked to just stop moving,  
told *něi ji gang ho* and at eight I did know.

First, a bowl of thousand-year-old eggs,  
husks removed – their pine branch patterns  
threatening of a potential fracture.

My father – a lanky, stoic Calabrian – ate jellyfish  
sliced into thin strips next to me. We twirled  
it like pasta, looped around our chopsticks.

*Woo joo* – messy – the many aunts whispered  
*sik jung yi gáu* – eats like a dog, they sneered.  
My mother stiffened.  
Half this, half that – *Ing gáu*.



## Entered Suzhou by train,

another low-lying city.

Braced by narrow, empty canals

and peaked by its oldest and newest structures –  
the twin pagodas, each crowned by decapitated stone monks,

and a shopping center with wide, glass windows  
trimmed with pink and green neon lights –

one of which I sat behind, eating dark  
petals of duck breast sliced nearly to transparency.

The Master of Nets Garden,  
The Humble Administrator's Garden,

all of the tourist bustled parks  
that I never saw

but bought a role of postcards of  
to bring back for my grandfather:

each was laminated and perforated,  
with the site elegantly described

in printed calligraphy on the back.  
The giant panda in the city zoo

that loped across its wooden surroundings,  
or the children who posed and pressed

up against the habitat's glass barrier,  
leaving oily shadows

of food stained fingers and the tips of noses.  
I stood there long enough

to be come a fixture of the exhibit –  
curly-haired wài guó rén asked to drape my arms

over the slim shoulders of identical twin girls  
as their mother snapped a photograph.

Suzhou, where on my last morning  
I hitched a wooden latch in the hostel shower

knelt that summer's skirt down towards my feet  
and took my last hot shower in central China.



## When you were alive

winter-melons grew fat and round  
in your backyard garden  
stretching their caterpillar's fur,  
and lazing atop each other  
like well pet dogs in the sun.

I carried flat-faced squashes  
down to the basement tap and held them  
there, underneath the tepid water  
striking them with my knuckles  
to release their ripened baritones.

In the kitchen, unwrapping the hatchet  
that you sometimes used for crabs,  
you watched as I cleaned then tore  
bright cilantro leaves from their stems.  
Boiling water, chicken bones and a solitary

cup of rice, we watched – you with one hand  
cupping your lean back, me turtle-like atop  
a borrowed stool – as the mixture congealed,  
the lid rattled, the vapors escaped.  
After wiping your hands across a dish towel,

you would place a candied lotus root  
on my extended, child's tongue –  
some small token, patiently dissolved as I worked.  
Now gong-gong and I eat alone.

We chase a chicken through the yard  
or buy a flat white fish. The television hums  
slowly over itself, and in your garden  
the vegetables fear no damage  
other than their own violent peak.

## Yellow

*"The superior whites had to exclude the inferior Asiatics,  
by law, or, if necessary, by force of arms." – S. Gompers*

I coated my face with goldenrod paint  
thin neck and lips. Teased as a child  
for having strange eyes, pale skin—  
bruised in playgrounds, then bedrooms,

Yellow, when bitten or hit.

Bruised in playgrounds, then bedrooms  
for having strange eyes, pale skin,  
thin neck and lips. Teased as a child,  
they coated my face with goldenrod paint.

## What the body holds

No one closes the eyes of a dead horse,  
although presently the flies try.  
They gather around the dark, milky orb –

bedding down flamboyantly,  
greedily breeding into tear ducts,  
the dulled contents of the eye:

pupil, aqueous humor,  
the stiff lens and cornea.  
I close my eyes when questioned

after our public viewings.  
I close them tightly to the man  
who leans forward in his chair

with his mouth agape:  
his dark throat presented as an invitation  
to push forth the histories of my body.



## The morning after you left, I lifted you as always to wash your arms & face

in the days that followed  
brothers returned home,  
like unexpected friends  
baring small, useless gifts.

I arranged some of them  
in your family's living room –  
the basket of oranges,  
tied with a satiny red ribbon

that our fathers scoffed at  
and quickly removed.  
On the second night  
one of them insisted

that you be buried  
in a plain white gown,  
but I have never been  
much of a seamstress

and soothed myself instead  
by braiding strips of starched,  
white muslin into your hair.  
Later, when my father returned home

with his silent companion  
he entertained us solemnly  
with stories from their foreign  
childhood – a trained duck,

a tantalizing visit with the King of Siam's  
three-hundred wives. More specifically  
how the women begged our fathers  
to pick them up one-by-one, and how they complied –

just sheepish, eager boys – placing their hands  
under hundreds of pairs of damp, slender arms.

July 4, 1832

*From Chang & Eng to Mrs. Coffin by Mr. Harris' hand*

Should you be greatly concerned for my comfort  
let it be as a shipowner would fret over the final

voyage of the oldest freighter in his dwindling fleet.  
Patiently his dock crew might wait for the ship's return –

axes & other forms of machinery at hand, so that upon  
immediate sighting the boat could be hacked for scraps.

Naturally, *whilst this ship was young (If I may so speak  
of a ship) & strong & seaworthy enough to bring*

*home rich freights to its owners, it was well kept,  
well painted, well furnished & boarded by strong crew.*

Although it could well be true that you did love me,  
& it is certain that from within the folds of your contract's

grip I was well fed & clothed & lived in the best houses –  
& yet these were the very necessities that guaranteed

my popularity & in turn your fantastic monetary success.  
Much like a young ship requires fine masts, rigging,

or sails to remain seaworthy, a performer must survive  
in order to perform. But now I am *an Old Merchant Ship*

*lying in the mud & waiting to be sold*, as you have so often,  
so wrongly, promoted that *"I have been bought."*

Although in truth unlike the poor old ship I cannot  
honestly be sold, for contract and calendar decree

four months before this date I became 21 years of age  
& lawfully my own man. *I have, moreover, to be thankful*

*for the continued good health & the prospect*  
*of still being able to do something for myself;*

*notwithstanding the cold ingratitude of those for whose benefit*  
*I have so long & so laboriously toiled & endured hardships.*

Italicized portions of this poem were quoted from Chang & Eng's correspondence.

## In The Mütter Museum

The black finger prints on the cast of Eng's torso – that arrived in various directions – all large and adult sized, an army of children's thumbs. There were the black, grey and white hairs stuck to the death mask in patches along the brothers' crowns and nuzzled underneath their arms. The sharpness of each of their shoulder blades along their closest sides – popped outwards from sixty-three years of embracing. The skin encompassing their bones, the way that it lay stretched and then folded along their otherwise smooth backs. The slack in Chang's mouth, his curved and concave chest – the way that his body leaned towards his brothers' as though gravity acted with less grace upon him: the aftermath of the stroke that almost paralyzed him. Then, below the cast of the brothers' torsos, in a heavy lidded glass terrine their connected livers – bloated-looking and pale, sunk down towards the bottom of the jar.



## To whom do these bodies matter most

*Dr. Pancoast exhumes and photographs the twins*

Who holds them, bathes the rank of death  
off of their bodies, who raises them up  
towards the little light that reaches into  
the back corner of the sooty living room,  
who adjusts their limbs, so that the brothers  
can once again embrace – sharing their weight  
from shoulder to shoulder – who watches as the two  
heavy heads sink and turn away from each other,  
who will preserve their bodies and who will return  
them to the shallow grave in the farmhouse basement,  
who mourns the loss of flesh as others ponder the fate  
of a pair of conjoined, heathen souls, who touches  
them along the length of their connective band  
with an unmasked curiosity, some mix  
of tender feelings: *lusus naturae*, or similarly, the young midwife  
holding the head of a mother who died in her care –  
she who labored only towards afterbirth, cartilage and bone.

## Elegy

### I.

All of the stories I have been told about my grandfather Frank  
include some brandishing of his belt or tongue. He was a thin man  
with large, flat palms and remarkably straight thumbs. He drove  
trucks, had deep set eyes, wore blue work shirts, drank to slurring.  
I am told that I would have been fond of his strong, roman nose  
and that he would have been fond of me. Of his three sons, my father  
looks the most like him.

### II.

I believed in god for awhile in grammar school. It was the church  
by our apartment that fueled my passions – its vaulted ceilings  
painted with evenly spaced stars, the sooty stained glass  
and the padded velvet kneelers that folded out for prayer.  
At Sunday school I was given a silver guardian angel pin  
before my first confession. I wore it stuck through the pocket  
of my denim jacket and liked to whisper into it as though it was a tiny,  
sparkling walkie-talkie – my personal line of communication with god.

Often I asked to speak with my grandfather, the only person I knew  
who was dead. God didn't mind playing operator and usually patched me through  
pretty quickly. I don't remember what I thought that we talked about,  
it was hard to imagine his voice. Later my parents told me they raised me  
Catholic to appease my grandmother, she had stopped going to church  
after grandpa Frank died, although she never took to wearing black.

### III.

On Saturdays my parents would occasionally drop me off  
in Bensonhurst with my grandmother, while they bought groceries in Chinatown  
or changed the oil in the car. She still lived in the same house my father  
and uncles were born in, and if you looked hard enough in the patches of dirt  
along the new driveway you could still find some mint that my parents had planted  
when they were just dating. Along with my great-uncles they had seeded a garden  
full of herbs, tomatoes and craggily fig trees for the relatives on the block to share.

Sundays, in the days of the garden, were sauce dinner  
with tight packed meatballs and fried ravioli all sunk down  
under layers of my grandmother's tomato sauce.  
My dad, his brothers and their wives or girlfriends of the time  
would circle-up around the pale pine table in my grandparents' kitchen.  
Grandpa Frank always took the head of the table, by the window –  
food passed by him first and last, the cooler of iced six-packs  
rested on the floor between him and the garage door.

Grandpa Frank was not much of a conversationalist, but he did enjoy  
a catchy song, or a repeatable phrase from a variety show.  
Things that brought a smile to his face included ditties  
suitable for playgrounds or bars –  
*In Chinatown lived a little man,  
his name was Chingalanga Chang,  
his legs were short and his feet were small  
and this little man could not walk at all!*

My mother says he liked it when others sang along  
and that he would slap his hands first on his lean thighs,  
and then his gaunt knees and later on the table itself,  
if no one would chorus in with him.  
*His head was big but his body was small  
so the little man could not walk at all!  
Alas the Chinaman did die and in his coffin he did lie,  
they sent the coffin to Japan and that was the end of the Chinaman.*

The Saturdays I visited as a child were quiet.  
My grandmother and I would eat buttered water crackers  
while playing dolls with her nativity set or simple card games.  
She liked holding my hands or brushing my thick, black hair.  
Of her three granddaughters I was the only one she called princess,  
her little doctor Li.

## The Northern teacher

My mother taught me how to read  
with the Abcdarium bound onto a dowel  
at the spine. A-Ash tree, B-Brother,  
C-Cotton fiber. She has always  
taught her own children, except  
for my deaf siblings who were sent  
south to live among their peers.

Father built the schoolhouse for her,  
he and uncle and their famous double-  
chop. I painted the slats white  
with a broad, thin bristled brush –

reeds of rice gathered together  
before being slapped against a basin.

This evening mother and I sit  
over my lesson plan – the states  
of our nation: birds and plants  
for the youngest readers, history  
and agriculture for the oldest,  
the middle children split between.

Katherine must do the same,  
in her separate house, with her  
separate mother, but for classes  
we mix our siblings together:  
our bound families.



Mother serves me rosehip tea  
to spite my dark complexion.  
We both know that the neighbors'  
children have been leaving  
slowly, going for there lessons  
in town with the Northern  
teacher. What letters does she carry  
in her smart leather bag, suspicious  
and shiny like a doctors: X-Xenophobe,  
Y-Yellow man, Z-Zealot.



## Twinning

In crystallography, when two separate crystals  
share lattice points in a symmetrical manner.

In grandmothers, an event often occurring  
in maternal/paternal pairings, following  
or followed by disease, famine and neglect –  
effects highlighted by journeys across  
large bodies of water.

## Blood relation

From my gong-gong I inherited  
his thin blood, always slow to clotting.

After tripping at eight a losing a notch of my upper lip  
and a single, pointed canine, my gong-gong taught me how to enrobe

a cotton ball in cheese cloth – how to place it in the pocket of the mouth.  
Yet for the dreams that flowing blood brings, he claimed there was no cure.

Each of us older now and prone to more dangerous falls, surgeries  
of the gums and teeth, cysts that bubble to rupture: we ask after each other.

Often we compare our bloods as though we have entered  
into a morbid competition that we hope to win in tandem:

my gong-gong's platelets leading, marching up high and front,  
and behind them my blood skips to his preexisting rhythm –

they sing together, a song in a dialect that neither of us can understand,  
a shared language crafted only because we both exist: the high vibrant whistle.

## Passage

Your parents were second married –  
second to agree to courtship, second  
to bare a child.

From your mother you were third born  
and later were third to die, following  
the stillborn and the little girl toddler

who crawled into the fire place. Your father  
witnessed none of these deaths,  
but you saw each of them.

Surely you welcomed death in your life too:  
common house flies caught  
with little notice by a clenched hand,

salamanders loved on too recklessly in skirt pockets,  
the barn kittens you helped to coerce into sacks  
so that your brothers could drown them.

I have touched a few dead bodies,  
but never one younger than my own  
living self: grandparents, godparents,

a few distant, now implacable relatives.  
There was also the boy from my junior high:  
Khalid, and his death bloated face –

alien-like mostly in its familiarity:  
the shallow, pebbled scar  
underneath his right eye,

stretched into a breathtaking  
moon-crater along with the rest  
of his expanded skin.

His mother held his funeral in East New York,  
out by the car repair and scrap lots;  
where the biggest churches are.

There were hundreds of us who came  
to whisper apologies, to touch his cold skin.

## Separation of twins

Hang them by their ligature over a length of catgut.  
Kill it by drowning or with fire. Sacrifice it on high ground  
for the king because the king is god. Tie a cord in the center  
of their connective band, tighten it daily until they are freed.  
Let them take a knife to themselves. Wait for one to die,  
then quickly save the other. Hold a light up to the seven inches  
of shared tissue, try to see inside this way:  
see only shadows that are hard to read  
as anything other than flesh.

## Earlier

### I.

After all of your children have married or died  
you move into one of their abandoned rooms,  
where you speak to plants and care for birds.

When I am born  
you crush one white pearl and feed it to me  
finger-full by finger-full.

### II.

The first sign that something is wrong  
is your loss of taste. You season everything,  
discomforted, you salt the yellow cake  
we baked for your birthday.

In the side bedroom we hold-up negatives—  
the lump in your chest makes an odd sun catcher.  
With a heart shaped fan, you watch over me as  
I sleep. Humming songs about potatoes, tomatoes.

In the hospital you sew me an army of small  
rabbits, each one with embroidered eyes, lace  
ruffled collar. In the hospice I read aloud – eyes  
closed – it is hard to tell if you are listening.

### III.

The paper shoes left for you have melted,  
folded in on themselves – congealed with the tissue  
money that we placed under rocks, so it would not float away.

Crossing over the Hudson, we whispered warnings—  
afraid that you would be lost at sea. Unsealing the white envelope,  
I ate the sweets – three sugar crystal boats – all  
at the same time.

## Yee

### I

On her wedding day the men  
of my pau-pau's village taunted her

with her own name. Write it one last time,  
they jeered at her as she stood by her new husband.

A neighbor's son knelt before her with his back  
flattened like a tablet, another man draped

a leaf of white paper over him.  
There, on the wide of the boy's back

she allowed the brush to sip from an ink pot  
and then she made it lick out the bold,

controlled strokes of her maiden name –  
Yee, the same name that she passed down to me.

### II

I carry my own name high and stiff on my shoulders,  
if only to accommodate its bulk and shape:  
Carolyn – feminine form of Charles – of British origin;  
Madoo, a Latin declarative meaning my god.

My mother named me Carolyn  
in hopes of avoiding schoolyard teases –  
no natural rhyme will ever stick to it.  
My grandfather named my mother Constance  
in hopes of someday visiting Germany  
and the small lake he named his only daughter for.

My grandmother's name for me was lost,  
now only her maiden surname survives  
along with my grandfather's best guesses –  
small bright light, plum blossom –  
and the bastardized syllables I memorized:  
Moy Yeut Yee

## Mooncake Vixen

I collect the same things  
that I did as a child –

illustrated candy wrappers  
pressed in books –

unpaired buttons, bus tickets,  
the cheery, painted tins

of Spring Festival mooncakes.  
They are flimsy little boxes

each emblazoned with a portrait.  
Black Bean, a woman with cropped hair,

Egg Yolk holds a white flower  
up to her cheek.

I think that Lotus Root  
looks like my grandmother

with her hair coaxed into  
a stylized wave.

I never liked the taste of mooncake –  
rich and chalky, the overbearing

surprise of a hardened egg yolk  
nestled into the center –

but I eat them anyway  
vainly hoping that they

will someday grant me  
great beauty.

## Chinagirls

While researching I came across a ledger of ALL MARRIAGES BETWEEN CHINESE AND IRISH IN NEW YORK CITY. I read through the list of names, occupations, offspring and residencies like I was looking for someone in particular: some other Li, or Lee, Ly, another Carolyn. There were a lot of Johns, specifically Johns married to Sallies, giving birth to children also named John, or Sallie, or Margaret. More often than not the men in these marriages took their wives' surnames. They lived in the more cramped corners of a growing downtown Chinatown, sharing tenement style apartments with Chinese bachelors or even starting boarding houses of their own. A few curious reporters interviewed some of these families, but information primarily came from the censuses and crude political cartoons. In the cartoons, from familiar magazines – Harper's, The Sun, The Atlantic – miniaturized John Chinamen are shown gathering around the feet of their wide, pruned Irish mothers. They circle around her, just a flurry of queues waving about like the tails of a group of milk-hungry kittens. Their mothers' chidings are written out in slurred, day-drunk speech and their fathers yell down from windows in a pidgin English – a collection of *ah-so's* that droops just like the carcasses of rats and dogs they throw down to their sons below. Surprisingly though the children are written out as being perfectly articulate *mother we want rats*, or, *father we are hungry for dog-meat*. Evidently despite their inherited looks and longings they were perceived at heart as being American and therefore possibly doomed to lose or shed their cultural heritage, to dissipate into their city's landscape of White-European or Other. But where are the girls, I kept asking myself, where are the cartoons of the little Sallies, what names did people call them, Chinagirls? Doubtful. I longed to see their faces, the way that their parents dressed them, the men who they married, their children. I held on to a list of their names that I collected, as if to corral them together onto single page would allow them to blossom into their own matriarchal civilization.

## Sisters

### One

They see it most when we tie our hair back, expose the strange curve of our jaws: our twin necks – stiffly balancing our large, separate tawny heads – those which allow us to move towards things set into motion at a distance: boat, bird, felled tree.

### Two

Cutting things will ease the pressure: paper dolls traced first with the blunt tip of a bone folder or a letter knife. Mine always wear masks: tiny detailed cat faces, a raccoon carrying a slight snarl, the eager badger. Yours go to your siblings, and so some afternoons you sit on the front porch drawing your family from memory.

### Three

Escape into books when there is time, just remember that they are impenetrable to us. No face we read will ever be like our own.

### Four

Spend time contemplating your darkness, or how you bruise easily, or how the twirled sprouts of new hairs are visible even before they penetrate your skin.

## The year of the rabbit

I take a weekend in the mountains –  
shell dry, red peanuts of their husks in the car  
and pass a wreck, as always, on the highway.

When I finally get to Mount Snow,  
I keep to the high banks, following the paw prints  
of some long passed canine.

I call out for birds, but  
there are only rabbits here, rabbits  
and the unsettling whirl of traveling wind.

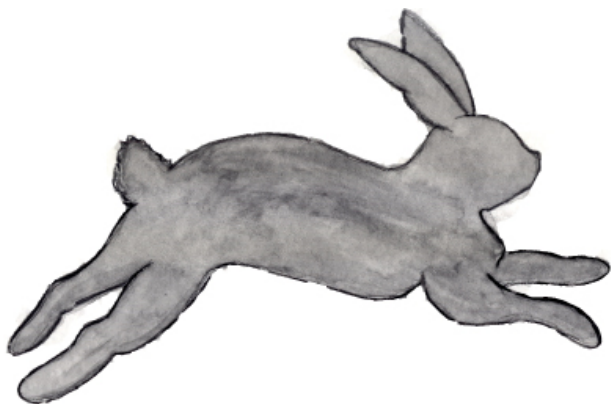
Rabbits and their dens, carved into the frozen earth,  
their little teething that they've left on stripped  
rosehip branches: secret sign.

I spent all of last January tracking rabbits:  
Eastern Cottontails with their paddle feet.  
I left wooden chopsticks as markers

all throughout the neighboring farmland  
in any thicket where I chanced upon  
some rabbit sign: yes, that's what trackers call it –

the little dropped pellets, crumbs of torn twigs,  
paw prints, or the rare wisps of downy under fur.  
I counted up these things, and left gifts for the rabbits –

summer foods: thin, sweet slices of gala apples,  
baby carrots shredded with a cheese grater,  
a mix of bright, young salad greens.



In turn, I learned nothing from the rabbits  
other than that they are hungry creatures,  
and only slightly curious –

that they are much too quick to catch  
with bare hands alone, although I am sure  
that someone has managed it.

I've spent my whole life wishing  
that I was year of the rabbit,  
always unsettled with my reptilian lot,

that which sums me up all too perfectly:  
proud, slithering ground dweller,  
she who self-consciously bathes in the sun.

When tracking at night I watch the sky,  
hoping to glean some new prophecy from it  
but it is always the same:

locate the little dipper and sip  
from the shallow cup.  
Give thanks for my two personalities,

the duality I receive only shame in denying.  
Forgive the twin who is myself,  
and is not myself. Fetus in fetu –

parasitic twin or fetus-like growth,  
burrowed deep in the belly of my hip:  
keeper of secrets. She is both me without myself

and me without myself. The named one,  
whose name has been forgotten.  
Inheritor of thin blood and chapped skin.

## Chang and Eng purchase a slave

Wilkeboros County, 1843

The two stand as apart from each other  
as can be managed – hands are hitched

on separate hips, or laid slackly  
along widespread stances.

Occasionally, one will point to the other,  
as if to say *there is a strong fellow to work our fields*

and the other might nod a small shrug,  
some vibration of agreement, *we will break him*

they agree in silence, *we will work him until our fields  
are as ample and fertile as our neighbors' daughters –*

*those who we have been deemed to lowly to court,  
to dance with, to sing to, to make wives of, to touch.*

## Horse tamers

Nannie accompanies her father on his penultimate European voyage.

When our boat docked  
against the high, wood-planked shore,  
Katherine and I joined the other spectators  
already gathered on the deck to watch as our fathers  
scaled a modest seaman's ladder  
up to Western Europe.

I have seen them mount a horse together,  
a young buck, feral or wild-minded at best.  
It was brought to them  
extending its proud neck,  
which they bore down upon in such a way  
that it became a solemn, quiet animal,  
reproachful of all other creatures  
but strong and tamed enough  
to pull a lady's carriage.

In Wilkesboro County  
they are famous for this –  
horse taming and settling.  
When they have successfully  
broken a new beast they ride it  
unceremoniously through town,  
two connected brothers elegantly topping off  
a third newly submissive creature.



## Blue silk

Blue silk is what you asked for, holding up  
a fragment of some porcelain relic –  
plate or teacup, a slump shouldered figurine?

The dark blue was saturated throughout,  
and showed no signs of wear outside of its obvious  
brokenness: something precious dropped too soon.

We walked through the fabric district together –  
you and I and your cheerful twin, who was less afraid  
to touch than you. Eng would often stop to finger

some little scrap of fabric or run the palm of his hand  
across stacked bolts of vibrant pima cottons and linens.  
You were more reserved, following him towards

his impulses with an advertised detachment.  
When we were unable to find a sample to your liking  
we walked back to the hotel in silence –

you carried the dark little remnant in your hand  
turning it over and over again with a circling  
of your thumb and ring finger.

## My Pau-pau running

### I

When I was young  
with uncoordinated fingers,  
my pau-pau would laugh,  
delighted by the sight of my father  
bending to tie my shoes.

### II

After dinner my gong-gong recites  
stories about my pau-pau  
each of which gently suggests  
how little I knew about her.

I unwrap oranges,  
first laying down the thin, festive wax papers,  
then piling their peels on top.

His favorite story to tell  
is of my pau-pau running.  
He tells it from the vantage point  
of a phantom limb,  
the amazed, beaten boys –  
her school yard opponents –  
or some especially thick callous  
developed in the valley  
of her left bare foot.

### III

A seat moans as a latecomer settles  
into a back row seat. The projector clicks,  
the film threatens to burn as always –  
we children yell and scream with excitement  
as a courtesan's face melts, caramel like,  
into the chest of her shamed lover.  
And then the blinding light.  
And then the grumbles of the projectionist,  
heavily punctuated in curses only our grandfathers –  
*wai-gong, wai-zu-fu, gong-gong* – can truly understand.

This film does not burn.  
Instead I stroke the inside of my pau-pau's arm  
as a girl runs barefoot after a green truck.

### You must send blankets

*Christopher Wren writes to his sister Nannie*

We wear our horses to exhaustion,  
giving them little to eat other than grass  
and scarcely time to stop and graze.

Today I walked alongside my horse,  
fearing that she would crumble beneath me.  
We have been thirty days marching.

The Yankees are quick to the match.  
At times we walk through torched fields,  
the quietest places I have ever known

empty of chattel – the animals and slaves  
unburdened of their services left to run off.  
It snows here often now, although it disappears

with the same maddening rapidness,  
leaving the trails nearly impassible –  
thick with mud at times shin deep.

Dear sister, do you remember  
the summer you had to be fetched  
from the muck of the river?

Catching frogs, that's what you  
had been doing when the earth  
slumped in beneath you.



## Preparation for death

Catherine died at home,  
just as I had assured her.  
Earlier, she had feared

a European death, final  
breath in a catacomb or  
a theater — stepping onto

the stage to join our fathers,  
one hand slipping from its  
perch amid her skirting.

Worse were only her night  
delusions: some crazed belief –  
towards the end, poor heart –

that she was still abroad  
and dying there. For her  
each passing day of living

was simply a show of her memory's  
actors: she believed her mind  
to be purging out its final comforts.

Mother says that she had spent  
too much time in preparation  
for death, something, which I

should presently be mindful of.

## We feel compelled to run,

naming familiar objects in the distance  
in the two languages that we both share –  
*zhāng shù* tree, *lù dēng zhù* lamppost.

We push off from night-cooled asphalt  
rounding oil slicked corners, a sleeping farmer's truck,  
spontaneous fires built up from abandoned towers of newspapers  
or the waxy leaf wrappers of half-eaten *zòngzi*.

The packs of stray dogs – small, half-blind mutts,  
with sagging, bitten ears and purring growls –  
all keep a careful distance, trotting  
with a cheerful domesticity on the edge of the sidewalk.

At the East Gate we pause with elbows flush against our thighs.  
I focus on the delicate pounding of blood returning, turning, through me.  
Brian nods towards two men with linen tough skin,  
leaning over the pick-up of a dented blue truck.

Their arms are extended down towards the street  
tensed so as to keep their four ungloved hands gripped  
around the wooden handles of a precariously trailing wheelbarrow  
generously filled with striped, fragrant watermelons.



## My Gong-gong's house

My gong-gong's house is filled with collections of plastic figurines, vases, hundreds of shaped cologne bottles, decorative plates emblazoned with bright, lead paints. A grove of plastic orange trees separates the kitchen from the living room, offering up its sun-bleached, spherical fruits. There are two red wire dragons that stand at attention by the black-and-white head shot of my morose, liver-spotted great-grandfather. Above the television are a cluster of bare-bottomed photographs of me as a baby next to a plate featuring the shiny headed King of Siam, or one of a panda tilted back with its stiff feet pushed out towards its viewer. Scattered throughout the apartment are my gong-gong's own paintings: heavily textured temperas featuring loved ones ranging from Jesus as a shepherd, to my pau-pau a year before she died. I have touched most of these objects, blown dust off of plastic horse frozen in mid-gallop, moved my gong-gong's reading glasses from his chair in front of the television, balanced a peacock's tall, proud feather on my index finger as my grandfather sang from his corner seat.

## Huí jiā,

*because the government schools don't teach Taishanese anymore*

I am being taught to listen  
to the nightly cautions  
of the flat bellied frogs  
– *xiaoxīn, xiaoxīn*,  
small heart, small heart –  
I am packing my knapsack  
full of tea, playing cards,  
intricately folded kites,  
a pair of embroidered  
baby shoes sewed together  
at the heel – gifts collected  
dutifully for my relatives.

I am memorizing phrases,  
idioms and characters –  
I am training my hand  
to write instead of draw –  
I am repeating sentences,  
perfecting the tones of  
– *wǒ ài nín wàigōng*

I love you grandpa –

in a dialect that he  
has never spoken.

## Expected transformations

My pau-pau showed me how to twist  
my ten fingers into a knot of ginger,

or a shallow, woven bowl: just two  
of her many double-jointed tricks.

Two years before she died, sitting  
cross-legged on the living room floor

she passed her clasped arms over her back  
unhinging and re-hinging each limb

at the shoulder with a barely perceptible  
tremble of her neck, and a satisfied smile.

For years after she left, I would lie in bed,  
passing my arms up to their movement's crest.

Each night I would wait for a few aching  
minutes, certain that someday my body

would ease into its inherited form,  
but like so many expected transformations

the shift never occurred: my unruly hair  
never straightened, the blush of my nipples

never darkened, my limbs never slimmed  
or strengthened.

## Yearlings

Followed by a small camera crew  
two of your distant decedents

break into the house  
that you once lived in.

They spend a long time  
fingering a rounded banister

at the foot of the staircase,  
certain that you must have touched it

each night as you walked up to bed  
with your brother and wife.

The younger of the two women  
has a mournful look to her,

although she was the one most eager  
to sneak into the house. She holds

her mouth a little open, like she is waiting  
for a dove, or some other small animal

to enter into the space she had created.  
I read once that there is a species of bird

that drops its young into other birds' nests  
so that they can be fed and raised

at the other species' detriment,  
starving out the original nesters.

When the yearlings are large enough  
they peck through the downy breast

of their foreign mother,  
to feast on the worms in her lungs

and heart. When I write to you Chang  
I slice out a cube of my warm flesh for you:

my simple offering.

## Cross Yourself

At fourteen I founded my own civilization  
in the backyard of my uncle's house –

it was not so self conscious a project  
as to be titled: I created no flags,

carved no pictographs into the rich clay.  
The rules were limited:

Love Your Girl Relatives

Honor Thy Elders & Brothers

Cross Yourself When Walking Below  
A Low Tree Branch

Never Bathe On A Moonless Night

Bury Anything That You Have Blessed  
With Your Name

My family was a large clan  
split clean between two houses.

We kept to close quarters, piling  
two or three to a bed

especially in the damp, drafty winters.  
And despite all of this I was a lonely child

and secretly grateful to be lonely,

## Colophon

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